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ABSTRACT

"Nummo" refers to "the word" or "word force." The aim of this publication is to provide a common forum for the utilization of the word force in exploring the opinions and creations of black community, educational, and professional theatre artists and scholars. This issue includes a play called "The Twilight Dinner" by Lennox Brown; a review of "Homecookin," a collection of plays by Clay Goss; an interview with a black scenic artist; and articles on the history of the Persona Players of St. Louis, Missouri, and the politics of black theatre. (CC)

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[Thematic Issue: Black Theatre]

NUMMO
A Black Theatre Journal

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Summer, 1977 Pilot Issue

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Artists and scholars who wish to contribute to *Nummo* should forward their material to the editor. In matters of style, consult the Modern Language Association style sheet.

Editor's Note

Nummo is a Dogon reference to "the word" or "word force". *Nummo: A Black Theatre Journal* is an open forum for the utilization of Black word force to explore the Black theatre world, while documenting its presence and exhibiting its creations.

Though the editor of this journal and people affiliated with it may have strong opinion about where Black theatre begins and where it ends, the journal is an attempt to be as objective and all inclusive as possible. Whether Black theatre is only that theatre which is written, produced, directed, etc. by Black people or simply any theatre experience that Black people are a part of is not so much the concern of this editor as is providing a common forum for the opinions and creations that arise from all Black community, educational and professional theatre artists and scholars. This step toward the unification of the Black theatre world through an organ that can be used by all is long overdue.

This country is full of Black theatre activity and has been for hundreds of years. In considering only the contemporary organizations of some repute, one can begin to see how large we are. The National Association of Dramatic and Speech Arts (NADSA) is a primarily Black educational theatre and speech organization that has been in operation since 1936. A later organization of national scope is the Black Theatre Program of the American Theatre Association (BTP). BTP began with a

range limited to educational theatre and has now expanded its interest to include community theatre. The Black Theatre Alliance in New York has been in operation and servicing community and professional theatre companies throughout the country since 1970. Modeled after the New York Alliance, the Black Theatre Alliance of Chicago (BTAC) has been servicing its local membership for several years now. Just last year, members of the BTAC and other theatre groups throughout the Midwest planted the seeds for a midwestern regional Black theatre organization and temporarily named it the Midwestern Conference on Black Theatre. I am sure there are organizations that I have left out, but my point can easily be made. Black theatre is alive, well and developing everywhere.

The material in this pilot issue of *Nummo* not only touches on what has been and is, but also suggests and identifies new trends. Be challenged by the recommendations of Abena Brown after reading her historical observations of "The Politics and/of Black Theatre." Be incensed by Paul Carter Harrison's "Remembrances of *AM*: the PERFECT past/future," which offers insight into the work of one of the Black theatre world's most gifted young playwrights, Clay Goss. Be informed by the "History of the Personna Players," one of many histories of a growing number of long-living Black theatre organizations that demand documentation. Be exposed to the "Black Scenic Artists" and the experience and thinking of Ed Burbridge, a professional Black set designer. Be inspired by the taste of truth in "chef" Lennox Brown's one act, "The Twilight Dinner." But most of all, continue to *BE*. Be the breathing, fighting, open-minded and creative people of the Black theatre world.

Carl F. Morrison, Jr.
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The Twilight Dinner

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New York—April 197*

CHARACTERS

JIMMY ..... Black, 30. American.

ELISSA ..... White, 30. American.

RAY ..... Black West Indian, 40.

TIME: *The present. Late Friday afternoon in the summer.*

PLACE: *New York. A small fashionable restaurant on upper West Broadway, near Riverside Drive.*

MUSIC: *(King's College Choir, Cambridge. "The Psalm of David," Vol. 2. Odeon-EMI Records. #CSD 3768. In the dark we hear the voices of a choir rehearsing in Riverside Church. The voices are floating down beautifully like soft leaves over the boxed ugliness of tall apartments, down over the green terraced park, and over the full-leafed trees to upper Broadway. The gentle choral singing softens the concreted harshness of the streets. It spreads a quiet spiritual grace to the late afternoon.)*

(Lights up on a small private dining room, which is at the back of the main dining area. This main area is itself off-stage. Yellow sunlight is still streaming into the room. As the robe of evening unfolds, this colour will change to a soul-sensitive twilight. JIMMY enters and sits. Shortly-after, ELISSA, dressed in hostess fashion, enters)

JIMMY: Thanks for saving it for me.

ELISSA: My little private retreat? It's always here whenever you need it.

JIMMY: I need it this evening alright.

ELISSA: How was your week?

JIMMY: Monday frightening. Tuesday painful. Wednesday terrible. Thursday unfair. Today Friday—soul destroying. Yours?

ELISSA: For a change—not bad. All the same. . .

JIMMY: . . . .thank God it's over.

ELISSA: I'm ready to go down on my knees.

JIMMY: And to complete this spectacular week of mine, I need a special favour.

ELISSA: Problem?

JIMMY: Huge. Enormous.

ELISSA: Okay. I'm on your side.

JIMMY: Somebody I haven't seen in years telephoned me at the office today. Like an ass I politely issued a dinner invitation. For here. This evening. And now. . .I. . .

ELISSA: . . .don't feel like it.

JIMMY: No way. I'm battling a New York Friday evening depression.

ELISSA: Does she know you'll be in here?

JIMMY: Not a she. It's a he. He'll be looking for me outside in the main dining room.

ELISSA: I can make sure the waitresses say you're not here. But they'll have to say why. . .To make it convincing.

JIMMY: I was suddenly called to a meeting?

ELISSA: And you'll telephone him at his hotel tomorrow morning.

JIMMY: That sound convincing to you?

ELISSA: Is he sharp?

JIMMY: But too trusting to be suspicious.

ELISSA: Then that should do it.

JIMMY: Definitely not up to seeing old friends today.

ELISSA: You haven't ordered yet?

JIMMY: No.

ELISSA: I'll get you a drink. And let me choose dinner for you.

JIMMY: Elissa?

ELISSA: Yes?

JIMMY: I appreciate. As usual.

ELISSA: Nothing. Don't tell me about Friday evenings. They'll cripple your soul.

(She exits. The music creeps in. JIMMY slowly unwinds as he lets the voices from the church bathe his soul. ELISSA returns with a drink)

JIMMY: Riverside Church?

ELISSA: Choir practice.

JIMMY: Getting good, aren't they? Recognize the hymn?

ELISSA: Psalm 94. David. "O Lord God to whom vengeance belongeth."

JIMMY: Beautiful.

ELISSA: Peaceful. I'll come back to keep you company.

JIMMY: You're the only human face I can bear this evening. *(She exits. The music fades out slowly, then suddenly the peace is shattered by the sounds of a commotion developing in the main dining room off-stage. RAY's voice is distinctly heard shouting above two female voices)*

RAY: I must have the right restaurant!

WAITRESS: But sir. . . .

RAY: WHAT YOU MEAN I MUST BE IN THE WRONG PLACE?

WAITRESS: Sir. . .if you could just. . .

RAY: HE MUST BE HERE!

WAITRESS: I'll check again sir, but. . .

RAY: WELL CHECK AGAIN THEN!

WAITRESS: Sir. . .you can't go in there. . .it's a private room. . .

(RAY enters in reverse. He hasn't seen JIMMY yet)

RAY: He must be somewhere! All of us have to be somewhere the philosophers say!

(RAY is dressed in an extremely casual English-Caribbean style. His blazingly colourful sports shirt is half-unbuttoned and half tucked in at the waist)

JIMMY: Hello Ray. . . .

RAY: I know I was right. If you say you going to be here, you going to be here. They ain't know about the old days.

(ELISSA enters through a different door)

ELISSA: I'm sorry about this. . .

RAY: *(A LAST SHOT AT THE WAITRESSES)* WHAT THE PROBLEM WAS, EH?

JIMMY: Well. . .come in. . .

RAY: I in already. Is obvious. What's happening, man?

ELISSA: I'm sorry that they. . . .

RAY: What happen to them?

ELISSA: Seems to have been a slight misunderstanding.

RAY: Was a massive misunderstanding.

JIMMY: Ray, this is Elissa. . .Ray, an old friend of mine from the West Indies. We were together at Columbia for a while. . .

RAY: I drop out. American universities does take too long to educate you.

JIMMY: Have a seat. What are you drinking?

ELISSA: I'll have a special dinner sent in.

RAY: Things beginning to look up. Now I know I in New York.

JIMMY: Great to see you again.

ELISSA: Sorry about the mix-up. Not their fault. This is a private room and I'm the only one who usually uses it. . .

RAY: That's alright. Where the washroom is?

JIMMY: Just through there to your left. *(RAY exits. JIMMY and ELISSA speak in low voices)*

JIMMY: Not my week.

ELISSA: What happened?

JIMMY: He walked right over everybody outside.

ELISSA: I heard this loud shouting from my office.

JIMMY: Of all evenings—this one.

ELISSA: Just barged right in.

JIMMY: Ridiculous. But this is going to tear me apart.

ELISSA: Who is he?

JIMMY: Kind of Special.

ELISSA: Family?

JIMMY: In a way. Yes.

ELISSA: Mysterious.

JIMMY: No. It's this racial thing.

ELISSA: Oh. . .that. Can't interfere.

JIMMY: We were in SNICK together when those really bad riots broke out around here in the sixties. He put himself right in the front line beside Black Americans. He would face anything—jail, fire hoses, police dogs. Even bullets.

ELISSA: So did you.

JIMMY: I had to. It was my country. Where else was I going to run to? He was a West Indian student who would be going back to his own country.

ELISSA: Couldn't he have written? It's a sudden visit.

JIMMY: Not him. In those days we were close like two brothers. Marched together. Picketed together. We shared a belief. He almost got killed once. I saw it.

ELISSA: Really?

JIMMY: It was no phony bravery. He was the real thing.

ELISSA: Interesting man.

JIMMY: The truth is he's exceptional. I admire him for it. But right now I just don't feel like seeing heroes from the past. I don't want to re-live those days. Youth and dreams and high hopes. You go past that point.

ELISSA: You haven't been in touch all these years?

JIMMY: He did write me. I meant to answer, but I kept putting it off. Finally I never did.

ELISSA: Tell me what you want me to do.

JIMMY: Anything you can think of. I really can't face this.

ELISSA: I'll invent an emergency phone call during the meal. *(As she exits, RAY comes back)*

JIMMY: Come on. Sit down. Years since you've been in this country.

RAY: Fifteen years already since them student days.

JIMMY: How are you? You're looking well.

RAY: Good. You too.

JIMMY: It was really something to hear your voice today.

RAY: I know I woulda surprise you—one way or the other. *(ELISSA returns pushing a trolley of drinks, glasses, hors d'oeuvres)*

RAY: Treatment of a king.

ELISSA: Extra special on the house. What would you like?

RAY: Rum and soda. Easy on the soda. Be reckless like hell with the rum.

ELISSA: And for Jimmy—one dry martini. *(She exits leaving the trolley so they can serve themselves)* .

RAY: Nice waitress.

JIMMY: She isn't a waitress. She owns this place.

RAY: Class in your ass.

JIMMY: She's trying to please us. I told her about you and the days in SNICK.

RAY: You a regular customer?

JIMMY: Regular. Yes.

RAY: You two. . .?

JIMMY: No. No. Nothing like that. Just friends.

RAY: No law against it.

JIMMY: What you been doing all these years?

RAY: Punishing question. You want to write a novel?

JIMMY: You went back to the West Indies before you even got your BA.

RAY: I never finished it either. You?

JIMMY: Yes.

RAY: So you got the almighty BA and left Columbia?

JIMMY: No. I stayed on for an MA.

RAY: An MA too? Then you left?

JIMMY: Well no. . .I stayed on for my PH.D.

RAY: Talking about over-achieving! But you become a respectable establishment intellectual!

JIMMY: Tell me about yourself.

RAY: BA. MA. PH.D. from Columbia. Clean and certified. You qualify enough now to read the 11 o'clock news.

JIMMY: Window dressing.

RAY: Nice suit.

JIMMY: Thanks.

RAY: You couldn't go picketing and marching in it though. It ain't no protest suit. That is a "the working class can kiss my ass suit."

JIMMY: Clothes aren't that important.

RAY: You have a different bearing from the old days too. A new posture.

JIMMY: Elegance and quiet dignity.

RAY: Right.

JIMMY: You always had this dream about politics on the island. Changing things down there.

RAY: Yours was to do the same thing in the South.

JIMMY: I remember.

RAY: You went?

JIMMY: No.

RAY: Never?

JIMMY: No. Never.

RAY: I went into politics.

JIMMY: And where are you now?

RAY: Another punishing question. I getting in shape for the forthcoming elections on the island.

JIMMY: I'm ready for another. You?

RAY: I was in the travelling business too. Tourism.

JIMMY: But you used to hate that tourist trade! Black servant smiling image. Quaint accent. Guitars and bongoes.

RAY: Yes. I used to hate it alright. Then boy, one day I looked up the words power and reality in a modern dictionary. I learn to love that white tourist trade fast—fast.

JIMMY: It looks as if we have a lot of explaining to do to each other.

RAY: You start. What you doing?

JIMMY: Government job. Special inner city project. Administration.

RAY: Married? You have more lines on your face than me.

JIMMY: And divorced. Immediately.

RAY: That was quick. She was a track star?

JIMMY: She got married again too. How about you?

RAY: Never got that mandate from any of my women. Intelligent voters.

JIMMY: What about the politics?

RAY: I was elected three different times.

JIMMY: Three????

RAY: And I'm broke.

JIMMY: How. . .

RAY: Wait. Something wrong here. With us.

JIMMY: Like what? What do you mean?

RAY: As if we really don't know what to say to each other. We embarrassing each other.

JIMMY: Come on. We have a lot to talk about.

RAY: There's a kind of tension between us.

JIMMY: Tension?

RAY: Am I making you feel uncomfortable?

JIMMY: No.

RAY: We having a hell of a time to get a normal old-talk flowing. This worse than television.

JIMMY: Conversation is awkward. . .even between old friends. . . after some years.

RAY: Well the talking part aside. How come you keep looking everywhere except at me?

JIMMY: Oh that! Pay no attention to that. That's just habit. We Americans don't look one another in the eye anymore.

RAY: How you know what you look like to one another then?

JIMMY: The movies. *(ELISSA returns pushing another trolley loaded with elegant dishes)*

ELISSA: I picked every one of these dishes with special care.

JIMMY: Consider yourself blessed, Ray. Nobody gets this kind of treatment.

ELISSA: Why shouldn't he? It's a special occasion.

RAY: Drink to that.

ELISSA: We must make this a happy reunion for you.

RAY: You have a nice touch.

JIMMY: I'll drink to that.

ELISSA: Thank you. *(She exits)*

MUSIC: *("King's College Choir," Psalm 49. "O hear ye this, all ye people.")*

RAY: Friendly girl. In the right places. The erotic areas.

JIMMY: You'll be making a mistake. She's different.

RAY: Know her long?

JIMMY: Seven. . .eight years.

RAY: She ain't wearing a ring.

JIMMY: She used to be married.

RAY: Another divorce? What happening to you people?

JIMMY: Another divorce.

RAY: The statistics high around here. How she get to own this place?

JIMMY: Did it all by herself.

RAY: She's younger than us!

JIMMY: Built it from scratch.

RAY: So what about you? All these years.

JIMMY: New York swallowed up all my years.

RAY: All this time in. . .what you call it?

JIMMY: Civic Rehabilitation and Administration. What made you leave politics?

RAY: Leave??? Man I still in it.

JIMMY: You used to get cursing angry about poverty, bad housing, poor education, rich foreign investors on the island.

RAY: I wanted change.

JIMMY: As long as I can remember you.

RAY: Soon as I get off that plane, I stride into the political arena. I throw my hat into the ring. An election was in full swing already. I start campaigning in high gear. . *(TO THE AUDIENCE)* you shoulda see me. You shoulda hear me. I set the people's imagination on fire. *(RISES)* My charisma was like a shooting star. I was the youngest candidate in a field of crooked bastards. I attacked corruption, graft, bribery, bad schools, slums, the tourist trade. I spread hope and light in the long dark night of the oppressed and the underprivileged. . .

JIMMY: Your dinner. . .

RAY: *(SITS)* I win easy. Elected at twenty-four. A baby in parliament.

JIMMY: I didn't know. . .

RAY: I did write to you. I tell you I woulda do it.

JIMMY: I didn't answser because. . .it was around the time of the divorce.

RAY: What happened to SNICK?

JIMMY: Things changed.

RAY: I notice a kind of quiet around the city. What changed? Who changed them? The mayor? The grocer? The police commissioner? The postman?

JIMMY: It's not like the sixties around here anymore—question followed by answer.

RAY: What is it like around here now?

JIMMY: Different. No question. No answer. A lot of silence. You accommodate yourself. . .Black, Italian, Spanish, Jew. It's different now.

RAY: But why? We made gains man!

JIMMY: I haven't even thought of questions like these for years. Yesterday's flowers. . .

RAY: What have you thought about all these years?

JIMMY: *(Pause)* So you were the youngest member elected?

RAY: I push through legislation that revolutionize the island after that first election.

JIMMY: What happened at the next election?

RAY: They kick me out of office.

JIMMY: What?

RAY: The Third World.

JIMMY: I had some ideas, you know.

RAY: What happened to the dreams about the South?

JIMMY: I didn't have easy choices.

RAY: Your marriage was so quick, it set a Olympic record.

JIMMY: I have a little boy, you know.

RAY: You is a father?

JIMMY: I'll never know why we got married. The most unnecessary marriage in the world.

RAY: What kind of girl? Nice?

JIMMY: That was the problem—niceness. Miss Young-Black-American-Woman-of-the-Future. Cross between Ebony, the New Yorker and Essence. All good taste. Charming. Interesting. Good teeth and intelligence.

RAY: Who she was?

JIMMY: You wouldn't know her. Not your type. Carol. Carol Reid from Washington D.C. Proud to be black, but not hate-white, mind you. Sexually liberated. Birth control pills in one of those pink heart-shaped plastic things. Discreetly tucked in the top right hand draw of the bedroom dresser. We went to thoughtful off-off Broadway plays with eight thoughtful people in the audience. Black art exhibitions in Harlem. Quiet jazz concerts. It's all coming back now.

RAY: So you got divorced?

JIMMY: Perfect taste killed our marriage. I need another drink. Same for you? I'm drinking too much. But it's Friday evening in New York anyway.

RAY: Now the conversation rolling. At this particular point in time—yes, I will have another drink. Hit me, brother. Hit me.

JIMMY: I shouldn't talk about her like this.

RAY: No. Never spread innuendoes about your opponent.

JIMMY: She didn't do anything wrong. Except being born.

RAY: How come you divorce then?

JIMMY: That damn baby did it.

RAY: You didn't want to have no children?

JIMMY: I didn't want that particular child. Knew it as soon as I saw him. Perfect copy of his perfect mother and his perfect father. In one of those rare moments of creative insights, we christened him—Jimmy junior.

RAY: Very perceptive.

JIMMY: That's what we were like.

RAY: Still he was your son. The issue of your over-heated loins. A legitimate vote.

JIMMY: Ever saw a boring baby?

RAY: No. How a baby could be boring?

JIMMY: You'd be surprised.

RAY: This is a medical first.

JIMMY: I fathered a medical first. Can you imagine how Belefonte looked as a baby?

RAY: Quietly intense. Like a folk song with a social message.

JIMMY: Man, I'll swear it. There is a conspiracy in this universe to afflict my life with perfectness and cuteness.

RAY: But that is universal paranoia man.

JIMMY: You know there is a rough beauty to being niggery? Tough hair. Thick lips, rough-hewn limbs and all that black black skin spreading?

RAY: That is the kind of beauty I have.

JIMMY: Well this baby of ours was the exact opposite. He had that blank pretty face God reserves for brown-skinned angels in Protestant hymn books. Cherubic, Seraphically stunned. He was so damn perfect that when he wanted his diaper changed, he didn't cry. He went into a depression. I almost slipped tranquillizers in his formula once.

RAY: Your baby was born with a middle-class face.

JIMMY: I woke up one Monday in Long Island and I had a perfect nervous breakdown.

RAY: Then the divorce?

JIMMY: I should've gone south. Or into politics like you.

RAY: Politics???? Don't mention that word. I am never ever going to run for elected office again—unless I'm asked to.

JIMMY: If they insist.

RAY: I'll give in.

JIMMY: If they kicked you out after the first victory, what happened the second time?

RAY: I stopped relying on my youth and eloquence. I get a calypsonian name Sparrow to do my public relations for me.

JIMMY: That's a good idea. To promote your fight against poverty, housing, education and foreign investment?

RAY: No. I dropped them. I put three new planks in my platform. Free birth control pills, cheaper liquor and more tourist dollars.

JIMMY: That was a mistake. Even I could see it was degrading. Against what the people stood for. What happened?

RAY: I had a landslide victory.

JIMMY: Good Lord!

RAY: I was made a cabinet minister. Ministry of Culture and Education. Government limousine. Special stationery. The-Right-Honourable-So-and-So. Youngest, most popular minister on the island.

JIMMY: Then there was another election?

RAY: Yes. The timing was perfect. I was at the peak of my popularity. In my political prime—although I was facing three different paternity suits at the time. My personal honour and integrity was unquestionable. Shining lights of public service.

JIMMY: Ah! What happened then?

RAY: They kicked me out again.

JIMMY: But Jesus Christ! How could they?

RAY: The Third World. *(ELISSA enters)*

ELISSA: Telephone for you Jimmy. They said it was urgent.

JIMMY: Now who could that be?

ELISSA: Go ahead. I'll keep Ray company. *(JIMMY exits)*

RAY: Nice place. Young, but on your way up, I see.

ELISSA: I try hard.

RAY: You're smart.

ELISSA: You mean about the restaurant business?

RAY: About life.

ELISSA: I'm not so sure how I should take that.

RAY: The way you handle things.

ELISSA: We all have to learn to, don't we?

RAY: Some of us don't.

ELISSA: True.

RAY: You make a big production of old friendships.

ELISSA: Usually I ignore them totally. But this one has what they call social significance. I heard about the things you did in SNICK in the sixties.

RAY: We used to live our dreams in those days.

ELISSA: Very impressive. Jail, police dogs, real bullets. I used to watch the riots on television.

RAY: We meant what we were doing.

ELISSA: You meant what you were doing. A genuine social romantic in 1976. Once upon a time they used to make movies about people like you.

RAY: I know. With music by Irving Berlin in the background.

ELISSA: White clouds floating across a blue sky somewhere in the mid-west.

RAY: For inspiration.

ELISSA: And idiots.

RAY: What's the matter? Don't you have friends?

ELISSA: No.

RAY: None at all?

ELISSA: Can't afford the emotional investment.

RAY: How did you escape it?

ELISSA: I never supported a cause in my whole life.

RAY: The question made you uncomfortable though. The answer wasn't too hot.

ELISSA: I always find it hard to answer.

RAY: Punishing question.

ELISSA: Some of us have small fashionable restaurants. Some of us have old friends. How's that?

RAY: No better. I going to ask you another one.

ELISSA: I'll try.

RAY: You think he feeling glad to see me? Or did he sink into such a low hypocrite since our days in SNICK?

ELISSA: You ask me.

RAY: Both of you buddy-buddy.

ELISSA: You don't think he wants to?

RAY: I could sense it the second somebody ain't appreciate what I is. Ain't want me around.

ELISSA: You've been special friends for a long time.

RAY: But now. This evening.

ELISSA: He's not shallow.

RAY: You're dodging the question. The answer is no, isn't it?

ELISSA: I didn't say so.

RAY: I wouldn't force you to. Friendship is a fantasy.

ELISSA: Better to have a small restaurant. You can always see it. Touch it at night. Add up how much it's worth at the end of every day.

RAY: I know more than you think. He didn't have no telephone call. You made that up for him.

ELISSA: You're a very sensitive person.

RAY: An old friend from an old cause? Give him a drink. Feed him. Get rid of him. NEXT!

ELISSA: School days are over for all of us. Gone. Forever.

RAY: I know I ain't wanted around here. What we went through in the 60's ain't mean nothing to him. But I going to stay. Hang in right here. To the very last moment.

ELISSA: Why? If you're not wanted?

RAY: To amuse myself. Just out of curiosity. I want to see how low an old friend could sink.

ELISSA: Ha! Ha! This is going to be good! I love it! Great! Fascinating! I just love to see a human being's integrity being tested.

RAY: Sometimes we sink and crawl lower than short snakes.

ELISSA: Don't I know it? You wouldn't imagine how glad I am that you came here this afternoon. You've made my day. My week. Shake hands brother. I mean that my brother.

(They shake)

RAY: Thanks. I believe in brotherhood too. You really don't like people, do you?

ELISSA: I prefer the company of rats. *(Pause)* Shouldn't have said that. It slipped out already anyway.

RAY: Both of you ice-cold and cynical. You ain't have no values inside you at all.

ELISSA: Don't get up and walk out. Even if there's nothing in a room. May be a dusty old rug or a broken down rocking chair to redeem. Save.

RAY: What happened in this city since the 1960's?

MUSIC: *("The Psalms of David" Psalm 131—"Lord I am not high-minded." The voices from Riverside Church float gently down over the trees, over the concrete apartments, and into the small room. JIMMY returns)*

ELISSA: Not work I hope. They keep him so busy.

JIMMY: Afraid so.

ELISSA: Do you have to leave?

JIMMY: Don't know yet.

RAY: An emergency in the civic rehabilitation department?

JIMMY: Small one.

ELISSA: Of all evenings—this one. What a shame.

JIMMY: I asked them to call me back in half an hour. Hope you don't mind.

ELISSA: No. Glad to help.

JIMMY: Sorry about the interruption. I hope they don't drag me away.

RAY: These things happen.

ELISSA: I'll make sure you get any telephone messages that come. *(She exits)*

RAY: So what this civic rehabilitation business is about?

JIMMY: Rebuilding. Restoring burnt-out houses in parts of Brooklyn and Harlem that were hardest hit by the riots in the sixties.

RAY: For Black people?

JIMMY: Yes. Restoration. We think if we rebuild the outside, the people will be sensitized to rebuilding their insides. Outer human values. Inner human values. Get it? That's the slogan, the main thrust of the project.

RAY: I get it. Restoring character. Providing inner values.

JIMMY: We have a vision for our ghettoes. It's not so much about a well-paying job. You can't put a price tag on any inner value. It's more about sincerity. I don't know if I'm making sense. We get emotional about our commitment sometimes. You know, Martin Luther King had a dream. Well I have a vision. . .

RAY: Don't get choked up. I know what you mean. You're making sense. In fact, that's exactly what you used to say about going to the South. Only thing is you're still in the North.

JIMMY: Yes. . .well. . .there were certain financial priorities I couldn't overlook in New York. In case you didn't know it, some price tags are worth more than anything in the world.

RAY: How much you making?

JIMMY: Forty thousand. We're federally funded.

RAY: Nice salary.

JIMMY: A few guilt feelings come with it.

RAY: But you could live with them.

JIMMY: Any reasonably good therapist could straighten you out in an hour a week. Look, you said you were broke. If you wanted a little something. . .

RAY: No man. I'll be loaded again by next election. Money time. We call Election Day Pay Day on the island.

JIMMY: What were you and Elissa talking about?

RAY: Nothing important. The more pleasant parts of life. The old days. She's cool isn't she?

JIMMY: Eyes open all the time. She's walked through the streets of her own hell.

RAY: Men?

JIMMY: Marriage. Her husband almost killed her. Beat her daily.

RAY: A lush?

JIMMY: No. Totally abstemious. Never touched a drop. Fine upstanding blonde, blue-eyed Protestant. Like Paul Newman. Yale graduate. Theology.

RAY: What happened? She was screwing around?

JIMMY: No. He was a mental case. Football player. Kicked field goals during the games. Then went home and kicked her until she spat blood. He's in a psychiatric home. Time for another drink. You?

RAY: At this particular point in time—yes.

JIMMY: Which reminds me. The third election campaign.

RAY: I sweep the polls. Overwhelming majority. But halfway through my term, the Opposition Party accuse me of embezzling ten-thousand dollars ear-marked for meals for poor school children.

JIMMY: You. . .??? Did you. . .?

RAY: You mean you think I. . .?

JIMMY: No. Of course not.

RAY: You take me for Spiro Agnew or somebody? A West Indian Watergate?

JIMMY: No. Not in the least. It's just that I can't imagine anybody even accusing you of that. You're unpredictable, impulsive. But a thief you're not. You're simply not the type who steals money.

RAY: Jimmy boy. I'm strong. And when the going gets tough, I can take it. I can tough it. But I'll never forget that. My darkest hour in public life. The scamps. They stoop real low. Sly innuendoes. Half-truths. Smear tactics.

Rumour and hearsay. Mud-slinging.

JIMMY: Professional politics was never for people like you. Too straight.

RAY: *(Silent pause)* Actually. . .I did steal that money.

JIMMY: What?????

RAY: Every cent of it.

JIMMY: You did. . .???

RAY: As a matter of fact, I've had my hand in the till several times. The height of fiscal irresponsibility. Ha! Ha!

JIMMY: But you just said. . .

RAY: I don't like people to challenge my moral principles.

JIMMY: They're taking you to court. You're in trouble. So that's why you came to New York so suddenly.

RAY: No. I'm here to get myself in shape for the next election. A colleague is taking care of that little matter at home. Young hard working.

JIMMY: Lawyer?

RAY: Brand new politician. High hopes and dreams.

JIMMY: What's he going to do?

RAY: It's what's going to be done to him. By the time the campaign start, they going to nail him to the cross for that money.

JIMMY: As innocent as he is?

RAY: The Third World. Decent noble type too. He'll never know what hit him.

JIMMY: The voters must have something to say about that.

RAY: Not really. My constituents—the handful who bother to turn up to vote after you bribe *all* of them to exercise their democratic right their ancestors died for—break down into six basic psychological categories.

JIMMY: You had them surveyed?

RAY: Of course. Greedy, greedy, greedy. And stupid, stupid, stupid.

JIMMY: Oh man! What other plans you have for this new campaign?

RAY: Surprise in their ass. A drastic change. I converting myself to a Kennedy-type image.

JIMMY: A West Indian Kennedy?

RAY: A new frontier on the islands. Is not what the white tourist dollars could do for you. Is what you could do for them dollars.

JIMMY: And you already start your campaign here in New York?

RAY: Boy I always in political shape, yes? Hundreds of thousands of West Indians living in Brooklyn. They entitled to vote back home because they here as illegal aliens anyway. I trying to contact them to make my image more international. Kissinger ain't the only one with brains.

JIMMY: What's the response been like?

RAY: Deafening. I talk in a calypso club the other night. After five minutes they tell me to haul my arse out of there, get

my bomsey out. They wanted to sing and dance.

JIMMY: A shame.

RAY: Is no reflection on us as a people. Voter apathy is a universal problem. The other night I address an entire audience of six in a church basement. Only five of them was asleep.

JIMMY: A Kennedy image?

RAY: Sure. I don't go in for this endless criticism of America, you know.

JIMMY: You actually salute the flag?

RAY: You know how much we have to thank you for? We was ignorant of the importance of money. We used to waste time with West Indian culture and history and heritage and all that set of stupidness. Is a good thing we change overnight. Today I look at our youth up here hustling in and out of the dirty subways and I feel proud. In their pant-suits, platform shoes, rings and chains and "what's your sign?", even though they never bother to look at a star home, they looking and sounding just like Americans. And what is most important, they thinking just like Americans. Now is true that some of them ain't get the Yankee accent right yet—so they does sound like comedians when they talk, but progress shining in their eyes. Their mouth dribbling wet with the taste of money to be made. A lot of us was primitive until we hit Brooklyn. You modernize us. Let anybody look me in the eye and tell me I lying. I will cuff the worthless vagabond in his face.

JIMMY: What'd you do with all the money you made from politics.

RAY: Spend it on women. I import a whole set of hi-fi stereo, a big colour TV, a Cadillac. American clothes. I even had servants. I wanted to look like a real Kennedy.

JIMMY: What about the press up here?

RAY: I went to the New York Times and announce myself. They tell me to bug off. Where you living in the city?

JIMMY: Near here. An apartment on Riverside. Another one?

RAY: We drinking a lot.

JIMMY: I'm just getting relaxed.

RAY: What your apartment look like?

JIMMY: Nice. Cute. Perfect. I stopped fighting my personal destiny.

RAY: Light mahogany colour. Neat. Tidy. Well arranged. Nigerian carvings. Angry Black books on shelves going up to the ceiling. Green plants. Billie Holiday and Paul Robeson records you haven't listened to in years. Some paintings. Cleaning lady from the south—once a week. You address her respectfully as Mrs. So-and-So.

JIMMY: You're laughing at an old friend from the sixties. Lacerating me.

RAY: Well. . .I did want to tell you something personal, as an old friend.

JIMMY: Yeah?

RAY: This ain't no liquor talking.

JIMMY: I believe you.

RAY: No bull-shitting. I mean this in sincerity.

JIMMY: Alright. From the heart.

RAY: I could never stand you.

JIMMY: *(JIMMY is genuinely hurt and shocked by this)* What? You mean all those years. . .?

RAY: All that time.

JIMMY: But why? What did I ever do to you?

RAY: You bore my ass off. That's why.

JIMMY: You mean after the 1960's? After all those marches? After linking arms together and singing "We Shall Overcome," with Black soul?

RAY: That was when you bored my ass the most.

JIMMY: Good God! But this is an outrage! Was it my singing?

RAY: There was no sincerity in your singing. Your voice lacked the ring of truth. Besides which it was always off-key.

JIMMY: That's a damn lie! It was the White people's fault. You know them. They couldn't march and sing at the same time. I had a deep sexy voice that turned women on.

RAY: You was a tone-deaf soprano.

JIMMY: This is ridiculous! I'm really shocked! You're not joking?

RAY: I hated that damn hymn anyway. It was depressing.

JIMMY: You hated. . .? But this is heresy!

RAY: When everybody else used to be moaning "We Shall Overcome," I used to be singing a calypso to myself.

JIMMY: A calypso! One of those obscene West Indian calypsoes I suppose?

RAY: A real dirty one. Jumbie Jamboree. About a naked party with ghosts in a cemetery after midnight. *(SINGING AND DANCING)* ("Back to back/belly to belly/We don't give a damn/we done dead already/back to back/belly to belly/this is jumbie jamboree.

JIMMY: That??? While marching with nuns, priests, rabbis, baptist ministers!

RAY: Yes. I always know you would end up like this. A fashionable marriage. Ending in a fashionable divorce. In some fashionable job. Living in a fashionable apartment. Wearing a fashionable suit. Eating a fashionable meal. In a fashionable restaurant. On a fashionable part of Broadway. After some fashionable therapy. From a fashionable therapist. Your problem is. . .you're so. . .so. . .damn. . .

JIMMY: Unfashionable.

RAY: You ain't show no growth.

JIMMY: I used to admire you in SNICK. But you turned into a contemptible crook. A Third World crook! The Third

World never used to have crooks. . .

RAY: Look at me. . .

JIMMY: The south still has soil. Earth to plant. . .

RAY: I become a politician. A thief. A travel agent. A bum. A self-employed unemployed. A contemptible crook. But you ain't become nothing.

JIMMY: *(RECITING POETICALLY)* Concrete, concrete everywhere/It drives you to the brink. . . .

RAY: You know I used to think you had charisma?

JIMMY: I was so young once, I used to think cliches were cool.

RAY: You get old and thin with the hard eyes and the bitter line of the Black middle class circling your mouth.

JIMMY: I used to think the writing in Time Magazine was a new intellectual wit that made me sound frighteningly brilliant. It was only bad puns.

RAY: You remind me of one of them solos saxophone players used to play during be-bop: predictable, endless, tiresome.

JIMMY: Birth of the Blues. The choices weren't easy.

RAY: *(TO AUDIENCE)* I shoulda know better. Never never have dinner with an old school friend you ain't see for fifteen years.

JIMMY: Absolutely not.

RAY: They get so old. So ugly. So disappointed. So sad. So dead. They puncture every youthful memory you store up.

JIMMY: Depressing. Frightening.

RAY: Why waste my whole blasted evening with you? Such a pain in the ass.

JIMMY: No. Never. Cold terror clutching your soul.

RAY: You know I changed my mind about ten times before I called you from the hotel this morning?

JIMMY: I'm glad you changed your mind. I would've been so disappointed. I did everything I could to avoid you.

RAY: I hope you don't mind my saying these things.

JIMMY: No. Not at all.

RAY: I was speaking as an old friend.

JIMMY: What else are old friends for?

RAY: It's healthy to get to the bottom of this hostility you're always showing to me. *(ELISSA enters)*

ELISSA: Telephone for you, Jimmy.

RAY: They called back. Right on time, too.

ELISSA: Sounds like the same person.

JIMMY: Hell. Why did they have to call back?

RAY: Because you told them to. Remember?

ELISSA: I could take a message for you.

JIMMY: I just don't feel. . .

RAY: Is your job, man. Restoration. Inner values.

JIMMY: No. It can wait. This is more important.

RAY: Liquor clouding your judgement.

ELISSA: I can say you're not here. You left.

RAY: It's getting worse.

JIMMY: It's only a job.

ELISSA: And this is such an old friendship.

RAY: But then you'll be forcing her to lie.

ELISSA: I don't mind.

RAY: Never know an old friend would cause so much trouble.

ELISSA: Not the friend. The telephone call.

JIMMY: Know what. I'll take it. Tell them I'm with a friend and don't want to leave. *(He exits)*

RAY: Amazing. To think it's all a lie.

ELISSA: He seems to be putting friendship first.

RAY: He change in such a ugly way.

ELISSA: Low hypocrite is a bit strong.

RAY: It ain't character assassination. His character done commit suicide.

ELISSA: We're close to emptiness inside. But not completely.

RAY: You lie easy.

ELISSA: Thank you. It's a natural gift I have.

RAY: That why your husband was so savage to you?

ELISSA: I ripped his soul apart.

RAY: Where you get that kind of power?

ELISSA: Too religious for his own good. He believed strongly in God. So I pretended not to.

RAY: What was the point?

ELISSA: To taunt him, of course.

RAY: God was so important to him?

ELISSA: Yes. This theology background. He was one of these new Christians going around scaring innocent people shitless, with this cold vicious love in their eyes for Jesus. Was important to him that I believe and be saved.

RAY: So you just lied to spite him?

ELISSA: It drove him mad. He had to keep kicking me. But I had his soul in the palm of my hand. Drove him straight into the psychiatric ward. Cute, yes?

RAY: So what's going to happen to him?

ELISSA: He's going to spend the rest of his life there. And just to add to the torture, I pay him these little visits regularly. I actually kneel and say a little prayer of hate for him first. I wear a little cross dangling on my beautiful breasts.

RAY: Jesus.

ELISSA: Come on! The pain of those daily kickings? He had a good toe. Led the NFL in kicking points. But, do I look like a half-back, or three-quarter back, or two-thirds back, or whatever the hell they call those sweaty overgrown brutes?

RAY: What's eating you people? What's happening to you?

ELISSA: You can't survive here if you don't know how to strike back at the silent enemies.

RAY: Like who?

ELISSA: Silence at night when TV stations sign off the very last programme. The quiet after the national anthem, as if America doesn't exist anymore. Sinister sound of foreign accents speaking English. Dirty red of red-brick apartments encircling you, endlessly red. Blank smiles of couples in fun-advertisements. Overeating. Rows of government statistics lined up in grey columns. Have a nice day.

RAY: And you have to strike back?

ELISSA: Each of us must be armed with our own emotional nuclear force. It's a matter of personal balance. To survive in this city, you have to feel secretly superior to everyone and everything in it.

RAY: Where does that leave people like you and Jimmy?

ELISSA: With an understanding. Detente.

RAY: No ties. No sex.

ELISSA: But an understanding.

RAY: So that's what friendship is since the sixties.

ELISSA: Precisely. An ice-cold unemotional understanding.

MUSIC: *(Psalms of David. Psalm 130 "Out of the Deep." The voices from Riverside Church pour into the little room. JIMMY returns)*

ELISSA: Alright?

JIMMY: I'll handle that little emergency Monday morning. *(ELISSA exits)*

JIMMY: Just beginning to relax.

RAY: Me too.

JIMMY: Takes me time to unwind at the end of the week.

RAY: High-pressure job.

JIMMY: High pressure my arse. I hardly do anything for the forty-thousand a year.

RAY: The Restoration?

JIMMY: Ha! Ha! Restore what? Don't make me laugh. Once a home starts to fall apart in America, you can't put it together again. Something about the foundation. They're doomed.

RAY: Like my loyal constituents at home. The stupid, greedy, stinking, rotten, dirty, lying deceitful bastards. You ever see anything of Joyce?

JIMMY: Joyce Matthews? No.

RAY: I used to like her.

JIMMY: Man you were in love with her.

RAY: You ever wonder how Carol is?

JIMMY: Haven't spoken to her in years. Not since she got married again.

RAY: You didn't have to break off diplomatic ties completely because she formed a new government. Always leave room for foreign relations.

JIMMY: Funny thing about Carol. For a boring person she was exciting like hell in bed. Like a transformation.

RAY: I woulda marry Joyce.

JIMMY: Carol had this way with sex. . .her thighs on a Sunday morning. Mixed up with a casual cup of tea and the Arts and Leisure section of the New York Times. Fantastic.

RAY: I could still see a short brown skirt Joyce used to wear. It had a zip at the side. It would dance up her thighs when she sat on a low chair. When we first met, I went around like a lunatic carpenter, sawing off the legs on all the chairs in my apartment.

JIMMY: You know, I get depressed a lot. But when I look back it was fun. I had a lot to be happy about.

RAY: Both of us. If you forget the H-Bomb, Rhodesia. . .

JIMMY: South Africa, Vietnam. . .

RAY: Tourism, multi-national corporations and foreign investment. . .

JIMMY: Our generation can't really complain.

RAY: We've eaten better, worked less, boozed heavier. . .

JIMMY: Been educated more while studying less. . .

RAY: And, objectively speaking, fucked more than any previous generation in history, except the Italians.

JIMMY: And we got damn good press coverage for it too.

RAY: The mass media of communication was on the spot man.

JIMMY: The golden age of screwing. Lust unlimited.

RAY: And even now. We still young enough to participate, and old enough to appreciate.

JIMMY: I wonder what it would be like seeing those women again. A little female company.

RAY: Perfect—at this particular horny point in time. Our voters indicating their preference.

JIMMY: I know how to find Carol, and Joyce must be listed somewhere. *(JIMMY exits)*

MUSIC: *(The Psalm of David. Psalm 53: "The foolish Body." ELISSA enters)*

ELISSA: Deserted?

RAY: He's searching for telephone books.

ELISSA: Haven't you had enough emergency calls?

RAY: Old friends again. Female this time.

ELISSA: Oh that time has arrived. *(JIMMY enters with some telephone books)*

JIMMY: Manhattan and Brooklyn.

ELISSA: I have Queens and the Bronx in my office.

RAY: And maybe you could stretch your telephone extension in here. *(She exits)*

RAY: Matthews. . .Candace. . .Cam. . .Carl. . . .

JIMMY: Matthews. . .Camilla. . .

(ELISSA returns with the telephone and the directories. From this point on, until otherwise indicated, she stands in tableau under a specially coloured spotlight)

MUSIC: *(Psalm 130: "Out of the Depth." Continues.)*

(At first ELISSA is frozen, then moving balletically, in slow motion, she puts on a chain with a Christian cross around her neck. She kneels, makes the sign of the cross, and reads from the Bible. Then folds her hands and prays silently. She is in her own world completely separated from the others. Her "ballet" should cover as much of their dialogue as possible. On the two men, lights change slowly and surrealistically to indicate a passage of time, during which they move in slow motion, searching for the telephone number and miming telephone conversations. The colour is now one of twilight blue)

JIMMY: Hello? May I speak to Carol? Thank you. Carol? Yes, it's me. Didn't recognize your voice. It has been a long time. No. . .No special reason. I was just having dinner with the old friend from SNICK I used to tell you about. Yes the one from the West Indies. He's in the city on business. Your name came up. Fine. . .good. How is Jimmy junior? That's really great. I'm happy for you. No, I don't have to call. If that's the way you both feel. I have nothing to lose now anyway. . .so long. . .

RAY: Not too good, eh?

JIMMY: Just my luck. Her husband answered first. They don't think I should call their home. They've already built a new life. They were on their way out. Friday is their swim-club evening.

RAY: How is your boy?

JIMMY: That pill. He's been elected class leader. Wears a suit and tie to school. Carries his books in a brief case. Could never stand that damn child of mine.

RAY: How is Carol?

JIMMY: She sounded different. Changed. More mature. I can't laugh at her anymore. She's grown. You better try Joyce, and hope she still has the short brown skirt.

RAY: Hello? You have a Joyce Matthews living there? She is? I didn't know. . .I can't believe it. When? Sorry to hear. Just an old friend who used to like her very much. No. Only visiting New York. . .

JIMMY: Married.

RAY: That was her mother. She's dead. Committed suicide a few years ago. Drugs.

JIMMY: I'm sorry Ray. I didn't know. I should've kept in touch.

RAY: What is the time now?

JIMMY: Almost eight.

RAY: How did it get to be eight o'clock? Three hours. Where did they go?

JIMMY: I ate too much. Getting dark outside.

RAY: The sun almost gone from the sky. No redemption.

ELISSA: *(ELISSA breaks her tableau)* Little dark in here.

JIMMY: Twilight. Always dread this time of the day. Between light and darkness. I don't mind the hot blazing light of day. Or the night black like ink. But this grey unwashed gloom floating uncertainly. . .

RAY: Sad drunk hour spilling from a dirty sky through a silent window.

ELISSA: You should have more light in here.

JIMMY: No. It's alright. We can see.

RAY: We have as much light as we'll ever need.

JIMMY: We were just leaving anyway. Thanks for everything.

ELISSA: You're both very welcome. You have an open invitation to come again whenever you visit New York.

JIMMY: Yes. We must do this again. And I must have you over to the apartment before you leave the city.

RAY: That would be nice. I'll enjoy that.

JIMMY: I'll definitely make sure I call you.

RAY: Thanks for the drinks and the meals. Must keep in shape for the next election.

ELISSA: Are you driving? I'm driving to the hospital to. . .visit. . . my ex-husband. Can I drop anybody off?

JIMMY: No thanks. I'll drive him.

RAY: (TO AUDIENCE) What happened after the sixties? The promises? We had faith. We really believed!

JIMMY: All gone. Everything died. *(They freese in separate worlds. Lights fade slowly)*

MUSIC: *(Psalm 49. "O Hear This, All Ye People")*

CURTAIN

Politics and/of Black Theater

Presented by
Abena Joan Brown
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Although there are several definitions of politics, all of them deal, fundamentally, with the total complex of relations between men in society and how these relationships are managed and controlled by the institutions in the society. Economic determinants also are critical in assessing these patterns. It follows then that capitalism, which creates and is dependent on an exploitable class, obviously, has a profound impact on the nature and quality of relationships and how any institution will function.

In 1976, everyone should now know, if not willing to fully accept, that Black people and their institutions were and are designated as the class/group to be legitimately exploited. Such is the meaning of racism.

Black theater, on the other hand, is not so easily defined or understood because Black people have consistently been externally defined and at best, ambivalently defined themselves. It is important to understand that Black artists/performers (other than being talented) have not distinguished themselves with any greater understanding of or mastery of their plight as Black people than any other group. Our history is replete with examples of being used and co-opted to achieve the political ends of the larger society. Actually he who defines himself solely as an artist/performer may have a more peculiar problem in that he has rarely been afforded the psychic rewards of using his talent to advance the cultural

norms which include or reflect what he perceives to be the totality of his being. The performer's constant dilemma in this culture has been how to find ways to express himself fully as an artist, achieve the recognition so critical to a stable personality and, at the same time, rationalize the oppression which will ultimately come if capitalism is to survive and thrive.

Again, it must be stressed that this same dilemma confronts Black people in every arena, but the role of the artist elevates the question to one of more profound concern. Despite the utterances by the ruling elite and their spokesman that art is pure entertainment or art is for art sake, the most cursory exploration reveals the lie. It is through art, especially in its most highly technological forms. that values. lifestyles, ideology and behavior are shaped. The classic dichtomy is expressed in the Euro-American hero John Wayne, most of whose movies during World War II were financed by the War Department. How else would the United States have convinced the populace of its invincibility? Any astute observer of Euro-American films would recognize how they were used to turn the Japanese into terrible slant-eyed devils with little regard for life and later into sympathetic characters, once Marlon Brando fell in love with a Japanese woman in "Sayanara". From that turning point in the 60's, the Japanese ultimately became honorary whites and industrial friends of the United States in the 70's. These examples from the Euro-American framework may help us to more accurately perceive the historical role of the Black performer in the theater and the films.

Loften Mitchell in *Black Drama* pinpoints the 17th and 18th Centuries as the time when Euro-Americans created the first Negro stereotype for the purpose of justifying slavery and solidifying the position of Blacks as beggars in the society.

Later, in the 19th Century, patterned after Negro reveleries on the plantation, Euro-Americans took the speech patterns and usage of the Southern Negro which were filled with Africanisms to create the minstrel. This theater form stablized the stereotypic notion that Blacks were "shiftless, lazy, improvident, loudmouthed, drunkards, and inarticulate."

Throughout this century are countless examples of drama which were used to support the prevailing view of Negroes or to rationalize policy decisions relative to their status. Most of these shows were for white audiences, since only few theaters permitted Negroes in as patrons and only then to sit in the crows nest.

Later after the Civil War, Blacks bereft of an art form became the minstrels themselves and "a caricature of caricature." So as early as the 19th Century in the pattern of the minstrels was set the precedent for the Jackson Five, Osmond Brothers, Jackson Five syndrome. The latter part of the 19th Centruy probably marks the first thrust to change the course of the Negro in relation to the theater. A group of pioneers created the musical which was a prime innovation in the American theater. An innovation which, since "Shuffling Along" in the 20's, has reaped great financial rewards for Euro-American "Stars" and producers.

With the advent of the Theatrical Trust Syndicate in 1896, during the period of New York "race riots," and the organization of the Niagara movement, the white point of view in theater was consolidated. Theater became big business with profit as motive overriding aesthetic considerations. Negroes according to Loften Mitchell were then expelled from Broadway under the relationships which then existed. Even though Negroes had only a toehold in shows which were basically parodies, the precedent had been set. Negroes are still, exaggeratedly anxious to get back to Broadway, ironically also called "The Great White Way."

The Harlem theatre movement came into being at a time when Jim Crow laws were being instituted, lynchings were rampant, and racism took on new subtleties. While many dramas written by Blacks were done, attitudes which persist until today also emerged. For instance, total acceptance by white society is necessary to "make it" and Negro humanity must be proved to whites.

The tragedies of the Harlem Renaissance—the great romance of whites for Black vehicles—has been carefully described by Harold Cruse in *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual.* Although in these early days there were shows written, produced, directed and managed by Negroes, he maintains that Negroes failed to use the creative energy of the renaissance period to solidify a theater which would truly reflect the life and interest of Negro people. Against the backdrop of White liberality and the romanticism of the leftist ideology, actors and theater companies were caught in the dilemma between vehicles which would authenticate Negro life and those which would be palatable to whites.

As Broadway "desegregated" in the late 40's, actors began to concentrate on self-promotion. Theater companies became defensive about doing plays for Negroes which might seem to segregate them from white audiences. The omnipotence of Broadway became firmly established as local theater groups began to see themselves as a training ground for Broadway. White people came not as they did in the 20's—slumming or for exotic entertainment—but looking for products for show business. All of this took place as the government compiled lists of so called subversives which had the effect of silencing social criticism in the theater. Negroes were deserted by their white "allies" and left to starve or struggle alone, says Loften Mitchell.

The sad thing is that Negroes, themselves, had not made any politicized decision concerning their relationship or the implications of events. They found themselves without any theatrical institutions, despite the fact that in 1936 during the Federal Theater project days, when people could come to the theater for a quarter or an identification card from the Welfare Department, over 10,000 people saw each of the two productions of the Lafayette Players. Where was our consciousness, our will for self-determination? It had not yet matured, although the dream of building a theater is a recurrent one. In a few years, the Federal Theater was killed by an act of Congress because the program was too critical of America and it seemed "communistic." Does this sound reminiscent of the experience of the 60's and the potential of the 70's with the voucher system?

Since we are much closer to the 50's, it is not as difficult to isolate

some of the dominant strains. The 50's have since been characterized politically as that of the silent generation. During this time, because there was no work on the stage, actors organized into the Council on the Negro Theater to do some of the same things that the more contemporary Black Theater Alliances around the country want to achieve. Loften Mitchell suggests that while some plays by and about Blacks moved to Broadway—*Rasin in the Sun* was a significant landmark—this was the period of *nots;* a play was described as *not* a message play, *not* vindictive, *not* just about Negroes, *not* an angry play, *not* a propaganda play, *not* a Negro play, and *not* a play to make whites uncomfortable in the theater.

Then came the 60's with its great surprises and upheavals to Euro-American patterns, resulting in a surge of creative energy in every form of cultural expression. While there was a rebirth in Black theater through the work of such writers as Bullins, Milner and others which made an impact on Black consciousness, the more touted pieces fit a traditional mode. *The Blacks* by Genet, a verbal assault to arouse the guilt feelings of whites, made the political statement that Blacks in power would be capable of the same excesses as whites. *In White America,* put together by a white man (Martin Duberman) was *the* Negro history show. Joe Papp, producer of the New York Shakespearean Festival, solidified his position as the broker of Black theater. Today, with 10 New York theaters, he is a czar of show business. Ossie Davis' *Purlie Victorius* made its mark in a return of the Coon characterization as deliniated by Donald Bogle in *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies & Bucks.* Robert Nemiroff returned, after *Raisin in the Sun,* With Lorraine Hansberry's *The Sign in Sydney Brunsteins' Window.* Since Lorraine Hansberry's death, this Euro-American has made a living off of her work—*To Be Young, Gifted, and Black* and several rebirths of *Raisin,* the latest in musical form. The South African playwright Fugard emerged with *The Blood Knot.* His other plays *Bozeman and Lena* and *Sizwe Banzi Is Dead* have lead some reviewers to describe him as the "most profound playwright on racial themes." But, as a white South African he does not write about his people as oppressors, about which he should know a great deal. He is lauded because his plays depict Blacks through the distorting filter of those who control. Finally, the 60's gave us *Day of Absence* and *Happy Ending,* two plays by Douglas Turner Ward, who is now heralded as the father of Black theater by Sepia magazine (although it was Robert Hooks who beat the bushes to get financing to produce the shows) and the Negro Ensemble Company.

Much of this paper deals with Harlem as a prototype of the collective experience of Black people throughout the United States. More has been written about New York theater probably because of the Harlem Renaissance and the designation of New York as the Negro capital of the world. In addition, the work of Donald Bogle, which examines the role of Blacks in American films, highlights similar recurrent themes. Over and over, Black efforts reflect an acceptance of white stereotypes or attempts to come as close as possible to white Euro-American norms in order to "get over." Repeatedly, Blacks' creative innovations have been co-opted and used to buttress a flagging theater economy. Even while Blacks were working in theaters in the Black community, there seems always to have

been an underlying concern with pleasing whites, and more importantly, hope that the situation of Blacks would change.

Although there have been theater companies in Black communities throughout the United States for decades, we can point to very few which have been *totally controlled* and *sustained by Blacks* over any significant period of time. Most have been perceived as a training ground for performers who would ultimately get a break into the "bigtime," meaning Broadway, Hollywood films, or more recently, television.

Harold Cruse in the *Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* speaks to the why of the collapse of the American Negro Theater after an auspicious beginning.

Quoting one of the original members, Mr. Cruse expresses the opinion that "the people in ANT didn't really believe in a Negroe theater." He goes further to comment that characteristic of all Negro movements and groups, especially in the cultural field, there existed ideological conflicts over integration vs. ethnic group identity. So that it follows, in Mr. Cruse's view, that once the greener-looking fields of "integration in the theater" downtown beckoned to the actors, ANT's all Negro theater idea would be underminded.

This, in my view, is not only the conflict of the artist, but it is the essential, penultimate conflict of Black people in America. It is irrefutable that when one cannot define oneself in accurate terms—we have been colored, negro, black—one cannot separate the parameters of ones being from the oppressor. This difficulty becomes compounded in people who accept the hybrid nature of their background, consequently living in *hope* of ultimate acceptance into the Euro-American family. All of this is to strongly suggest that a clearer definition and acceptance of ourselves as not colored, Negro or black, but as African Americans—people of African descent—will serve to clarify the direction of our values, lifestyles, traditions and behavior.

This simple, but complex decision would give focus to the content and style of what we have, perhaps, carelessly called "Black" theater.

A few weeks ago I saw a group of our most outstanding show business personalities on a late night talk show. The moderator asked midpoint if the guests had ever experienced racism during their careers. After a moment of disbelief, each spoke calmly without apparent rancor. The nightclub-TV-supper club star told of her weekly success on a talent show when she was 8 years old. In the final week, when a brand new automobile would have been the prize had she won, the applause meter was tied down before her and her mother's eyes. They were told by a functionary, when they asked "why," "I'm just following orders, mam." As it turned out, the producers did not want to risk her winning because a black girl had won the top prize a few months before.

The record star, who earlier had said that during her career she had completed 33 good selling record albums, suggested that she had attained her career goals in many facets and she was not "bitter." She did not want to dwell on those missed opportunities. But, before comfort set in, she quickly added that had she been someone else, she was sure that a Broadway show or a television show would have been hers.

Another guest, an elder, much admired and respected by the panel, said this racism was new to him; he was listening to the young ones talk,

but that he had tried to give dignity to each character he played in the over 200 movies in which he had appeared. He talked about being prepared as a hedge against insult, adding that he had absolutely refused to permit anyone to treat him in a racist way. Later, however, he revealed that he understood very well what the issues were.

The last guest, a composer-actor-singer, discussed racism in depth and its effect on his up-and-down career, ending with the comment, "Slaves are not permitted to have a theater—not one which would project his image, his life, his art, his values because it would threaten the master."

Despite the general commonality in the perceptions of these artists about their own life experience within the political context of America, the (subtle) differences pinpointed our dilemma.

From this small example, it became clear to me that there is no difficulty in identifying and understanding racism or the political system under which we live. The group seemed to be very clear. They also seemed equally clear that their artistic growth, development and livelihood had been stunted in relationship to the prevailing market. But, they had made a choice, one which was probably inescapable, despite the limitations. Only one person (out of the five) talked about the need for a theater under Black control and direction: a theater through which there could be total projection of Black aesthetic. And in his frustration toward the end of the show, this same person said, "I've been looking for a Black theater all my life and I've finally concluded there is none."

This comment could be construed in a variety of ways, but it suits the purpose of this discussion to interpret it as meaning that there is no theater with an Afro-centric view which is totally controlled in every dimension—writers, producers, directors, performers, stage hands, technicians, business management, promotion, audiences—to project the totality of what we are and can be in this country and the world. There is not such a place which would enable everyone to make a living. Obviously, such theaters do exist in America for Euro-Americans whose values reflect and support those which prevail. But, it seems just as obvious that, under current conditions, for a valid African-American theater to exist in the same terms would be a refutation of Capitalism in all of its ramifications. Since its founding, the theater has been an instrument of change and it is in recognition of this simple fact that men have sought to control its direction.

Further, it is no accident that theater became show business in the 1920's to correlate with the automobile business, the banking business, the utility business or any other business. It became clear to the entrepreneurs that the African influence in entertainment posed a threat to the Euro-American cultural ego, cultural values and aesthetic integrity, unless it was controlled. Harold Cruse again comments that because Black talent was/is so plentiful that it could be bought cheaply and sold high if only a few were permitted to break through, creating an artificial scarcity of a cultural product. In addition, this process also gives the few "priviledged" high visibility and perpetuates the myth of an equitable society. In practice this means that there will always be a very few "stars," carefully selected and comparatively paid very little.

A 1975 study of so-called Black films in Chicago revealed that these productions are a box office bonanza at the Loop theaters, but mainly for white theater owners, producers and distributors. Variety reported in October, 1974, that the "industry is on the verge of the highest domestic box office results in 28 years." It was further estimated that in 1973, Blacks paid over $173 million to see movies, of which over 95% went to whites. That Black-oriented movies saves a troubled industry plagued by low profits is now a matter of public record.

This same pattern of economic exploitation and cultural imperialism can be found on Broadway. The phenomenon of a Black Valentino, a Sepia Mae West, a Black Clark Gable in the films can be duplicated by a Black Anna Lacasta, a Black *Golden Boy*, a Black *Hello Dolly*, a Black Dorothy in *Wizard of Oz* and a Black Sky, etc. in *Guys and Dolls* on Broadway. All of these latter shows followed quickly on the heels of overwhelming Black audience response to *Don't Bother Me, I Can't Cope, No Place to Be Somebody, What the Winesellers Buy* and *The River Niger*.

Black people love to dress up, go downtown, and see Black people perform, even if they are not necessarily enamoured of what they see once they get there.

Without dwelling on it, we should realize that television has followed the same formula as movies and theater from *Amos and Andy*, a white man's view of Black life to *Julia, The Jeffersons, Good Times*, et al, which are throwbacks to the 40's, when Negroes in films were removed from the daily routine of real American life and placed in a remote idealized world (Bogle).

Since it is a function of the exploited masses to be consumers for the profit of a few, marketing becomes (the) key. Anyone who looks at television, reads, or listens to the radio should fully understand the sophisticated techniques which are used to shape the ideas, tastes, needs and aspirations of the public.

What to do about all of this, if liberation is the goal and theater is a mechanism to achieve it, is the question. Too often suggested solutions fall short of the magnitude of the described problem. But part of the solution lies in minimizing those contradictions which are inherent and cannot totally be resolved in a particular context. It seems that there always will be performers who, for a variety of reasons, will strive to integrate or to "get-over" at the maximum afforded by the society. The very fact that there are so many talented Black people insures an ever replenished pool from which the Euro-American can choose. Very heavy dues often are paid by those who select this path, either in personal tragedy, dissatisfaction, strife or financial rip-offs. Others, apparently, can rationalize or balance the alienating experience and, perhaps, enjoy their status. Those who are more conscious, if you will, need to develop bridges to gain tangential support from these people for the goals of the liberation struggle.

Because, as in all struggle, the war is initially fought by few who must recruit others into a successful operation, those who believe in an Afro-centric theater have no option except to develop one; recruiting allies in the process of building what must be a successful operation. No

one wants to be a part of failure.

Efforts to decentralize theater into communities is consistent with current trends since Broadway is, according to several reports, in a state of decay and stagnation. At the same time, there are innumerable regional theaters which are doing well and Black people are not only going as individuals, but are buying houses for fund raising efforts.

It is clear to me that a vital key to the success of the liberation struggle is money. To talk about control or self-determination without planning for the development of an independent financial base is to opt for failure.

Every artist would prefer to make a living from his/her work, even if it is minimal, and until such opportunities are provided along with the ideological supports, Afro-centric theater will continue to lose out. We must understand clearly that theater—all art—is business in a capitalistic system and as people have more time in terms of economic changes, art will become big business.

Black audiences are such a market, nationally, that theater owners are tooling up to take advantage of it. Paul Delany, in a recent New York Times article, quoted a white producer in Atlanta who is trying to develop a Black theater audience after previous attempts at forming professional companies (presumably white) failed. Mr. Manos is quoted, "We will present popular plays that are entertainment. We are consciously leaving out, at least for the first season, contemporary serious plays dealing with Black problems, though we may branch out into that later." The new theater's opening production is Dr. B.S. Black, an adaptation of Moliere's *The Doctor In Spite of Himself*, to be followed by *You Can't Take It With You* and possibly *The Odd Couple, Blithe Spirit* and *House of Flowers*. "We're saying, 'Come on out and enjoy yourselves, nothing serious,' Mr. Manos explained. From a historical perspective, Mr. Manos is saying more than that. Our history repeats itself. It will continue to do so since the Euro-American and the rules of capitalism never change. The question is, can we?

In order to compete or to offset these forces, several developmental things must be done:

(1) We need to develop more and good playwrights who write good plays which reflect the diversity of our experiences as Black people. The pimps, the whores, etc., are dramatic characters, but our range is much more complex and sophisticated. It is doubtful that audiences want constantly to be reminded of enslavement, degradation, struggle. "I see that on the street everyday." People do want to be entertained.

(2) We must develop competence in our theaters. Actors, technicians, everyone needs to develop a seriousness about their craft. No audience will put up with substandard work for long, nor should they be expected to in the name of struggle. Liberation demands competence.

(3) Sophisticated marketing techniques need to be employed by Afro-centric theaters to the maximum which can be afforded. Companies, unable to compete on the open market, can take the time to become tax-exempt institutions, which guarantees access to a certain amount of media coverage. People with the skills in public relations and other complementary fields should be recruited to work in these areas. They are

around and ideas of ideological correctness should not be a barrier.

(4) Along with this, systematic organizing and sharing should be implemented to build audiences for all the Afro-centric theaters in a community.

(5) Facilities continue to be a problem. Too often Afro-centric theaters are uncomfortable and limiting in terms of the variety of life styles in the Black community. Most Black people do not wear African garb, drink only juice or refrain from smoking. Without going overboard, African Americans must find ways to coalesce with Blacks and Negroes. We must move to co-opt these latter groups, relating to them on the basis of our shared experience in this country. Black people know they have been oppressed, whether they choose to overtly convey it or not.

(6) Afro-centric theater groups need to organize to be mutually supportive to attain the things desperately needed. We are talking about building a major institution. Groups working together could deal more effectively to secure adequate facilities, professional fund raisers, competent trainers in various aspects of craftsmanship and consultation in effective marketing techniques.

Conceivably, with such preliminary steps, the day might come when any community might have a series of community groups where playwrights, technicians, performers, etc., might learn and perfect their craft and, upon achieving a defined level of competence, could move into a professional repertory company under total African-American control.

Planning, organizing and hard work is what it will take to bring a halt to cultural imperialism and recapture the minds of our people. Soweto did not go up over jobs, bussing, or lunch counters, but over language, one of the keys to culture. The struggle is ours. La Luta Continues.

Remembrance of AM —the PERFECT past/future

A review of *Homecookin,'* an anthology of plays by Clay Goss (available from the Howard Univeristy Press).

By Paul Carter Harrison

". . .Waking up one morning to know who I was or am. Past Perfect Present Future Am. . .Philly, North Philly, Harlem, Watts Am."

Homecookin'—Goss

Much of what we recall from the past is the residue of experience which gives definition to what we are presently about and, at times, informs where we are going. We seek a sense of continuity which reflects our accumulative history in a graphic representation of experience that coalesces around the iconic quality of *AM*. I am Man. I am Wo/man. I am oppressed. I am the maker of Kingdoms to come! It is the stuff which gives birth to the mythic substance of *AM*. Inasmuch as myth is a component of reality, it should not be confused with manufactured identity. Images projected through a mythic frame allow *AM* to preserve the nobility of its existence. We discover in the recollections of the street-corner story-teller not only the lyrics of the poet and the rhythms of the musician, but also a system of symbols excavated from the sediments of experience. What emerges is a mythic reality which tends to unify our collected sense of *AM*.

Clay Goss has a fertile memory. He views FAMILY to be the quintescense of *AM*:

> Above all else in this limited universe we view as home, there is the family. The eternal coroination and continuation of ourselves, passed down to our own selves, respectively. The family. All that is behind us, beyond even our history. What is here and now. What is close now. What will be before us even in the future. Man, woman, daughter, son-child, like time continuously on the run.

As his stories unfold, we are seized by the urgency of TIME which is never static. There is an immediacy of experience which liberates the past from being simply frozen history. As a result, the present becomes intelligible. TIME is understood here to be a matrix of events which give shape to our contemporary actions. Relatedness of certain events in our TIME transcends linear description of our contemporary presence. Memory, then, is like a SHADOW, an experiential mode which helps stabilize our vision of reality. The SHADOW becomes an active force of the imagination. It provides the resource images necessary for manipulation in the fluid matric of TIME so that events, with proper association, are never locked into linear, experiential fixity.

While a great deal of new writing has recently emerged in the Black Theatre, most of it appears to be bound by experiential fixity. Rather than grapple with the symbolic choices in the black experience which might be germaine to the quality of *AM*, most playwrights tend to settle for the material duplication of events which best describe a certain REALISM. While there has been excellence in the REALISM genre, many of these works tend to reflect a lack of confidence in the abstract reality generated in black social interaction which produce symbolic relationships to ethnic values within our lifestyle. When these plays view the past, they are most often locked into the MATERIAL aspects of social conflict which, at best, generates pathos; and at worst, a useless nostalgia. Contemporary Black Theatre of the Sixties fixed its view on the obvious aspects of black discontent in an effort to galvanize its public into positive counter-reactions to oppression. Goss makes the observation:

> For black theatre to have a key role or function in the lives of black people, it

> must be a theatre that is *familiar* to the majority of black folks. Not at least familiar, but at its best and at its most—familiar. To a degree it must reflect those basic values, of the family of people it is addressing itself to. It must address itself to the basic problems of the family it claims to be about.

REALISM might not be the genre that will allow us to attend the familiar in our experience *at its most*. REALISM despite some accomplished models of the form, tends to be simply a play which borrows the sensations of black experience without assigning the experience its higher meaning, its metaphoric significance.

The implication here is not an appeal for a theatre that abstracts the experience beyond recognition; a sort hopeless *avant-gardism*. However, we are reminded that the Negro Rennaisance was also preoccupied with the descriptive, at times even romanticized, nature of black life. Among the writers of the period was Jean Toomer who was perhaps one of the few authors who challenged the respected literary models of the time to create a story telling form which fused IDEA and MATERIAL. In his poetic treatment of *Cane*, we follow characters through the familiar trappings of black life, yet the work generates symbols which underscore the ethos of the experience.

Clearly, a culture of people cannot survive without the capacity to translate the sweat and toil of its existence beyond objective, materialistic values. Within every experience exists an IDEA, an abstract value which gives significance to the routine exercise of practical living. The person who has the acumen to perceive the harmonious balance between IDEA and MATERIAL within those familiar and practical considerations contributes greatly to our spiritual enlightenment, as well as corporeal well-being. Such a person is often called an *artist*. But such an interpreter of our reality might also be an elder in *Back Water* or a WINO in the *Concrete Jungle*.

To argue for a theatre form which deals with life without divesting it of its metaphoric meaning does not suggest symbolic representation for the sake of being obscurant. Such efforts can only be sciutillating to the *artist* who has forgotten or lost touch with the living substance of *AM*. When IDEA and MATERIAL are fused, we discover works such as Oliver Pitcher's *One*, Sonia Sanchez's *Sister Sonji*, Adrienne Kennedy's *A Beast Story*, and Imamu Baraka's *Slaveship*. In the Caribbean, the works of Lennox Brown and Derek Walcott are exemplary models. And certainly, the works of Clay Goss. There are several gifted black writers who have demonstrated their powers with theatrical products that range from pure entertainment to pure propaganda. However, those mentioned above seem to have the capacity to reorder the common appearance of practical life into a spectacle of meaningful revelations.

Goss is particularly adept. He comes to the Black Theatre as a bright new force. Responding to his experience with proper deference and love, he efficiently grapples with the abstractions of black life without becoming ambiguously symbolic. He conceptualizes events in a manner which does not allow *ideas* to be necessarily subordinate to a strictly *materialistic* kitchen-sink representation of reality.

The landscape of Goss' memory is the urban experience. Goss

remembers *AM*, as does CLAY in *Homecookin'*:

> Remembering who wasn't I or them or we as a people wasn't songs. Songs that has no music sound. Sound had no high or low. Songs that had no meaning or sight. Sad songs can't be wrongs.

And the WOMAN of *Oursides* reflects on *AM* as she rides the subway to work:

> Fascinated by the "No Spitting Sign" in red and white on the green and blue tile wall.

Goss demonstrates an eye for detail within the urban landscape which is often obscured by the larger facts of life that must be negotiated for survival. It would seem that he has stepped away from the corner for a minute to acquire a distance on the experience which allows detail to reveal itself in its essence. And now, having grasped the essentials, and feeling at home with its nature, Goss has manipulated the existence of *AM* into a theatrical mode which focuses images in a fluid medium of TIME and PLACE. The images are galvanized in the mode by the tactile quality of his language.

It is a poetic language redolent of Cesaire, Toomer, Kennedy and Baraka. It is at times convoluted, yet succinct, meticulously orchestrated to create a direct route to communication. It is an elegant language with a carefully measured emotional weight which never dominates the event being focused. It has the hard-edged lyricism of an Archie Shepp sax solo which sonorously identifies the locus of familiar experience while invoking the essential revelations of reality. As the BLACK MAN in *Mars/Monument to the last Black Eunuch* observes:

> Free...yet...yet...or is there really a word called yet or just a feeling yet felt. Like I ain't rich yet or I ain't free yet or I ain't gonna ever yet...yet. I ain't gon' never yet...Yet. Yet...Yet...Yet...Yet! YetYetYetYetYetYet...

Stylistically, Goss manipulates the landscape of his experience into abbreviated snatches of life. The plays are like *tone-poems*. They signify a relationship to the experience which eschews heavy pathos, yet heightens our empathy due to a sense of relatedness. We are given a personal tour around the corner of life. And while the events all seem familiar, we cannot help but feel as if we are being compelled to an open window to eavesdrop on a man, who having worn his *mask* all day, *woodsheds* in a corner of his mind to release the frustrations of his private/personal masquerade. And our MASKS come off too!

In *Homecookin'*, we discover the disillusioned CLAY returned home from the war. He blows a solo/monologue, and later a duet, which conjures the spectrum of our collective tragic experience. And then there are the senseless urban *tribal* wars which took the life of *Andrew*. Here, the spirit of ANDREW invades the minds of his assailants and invokes the fraternal bond of street-corner *do-ah* harmonies along with other rituals

which identify one as a member of the family. In *Oursides*, a MAN and a WOMAN make a desperate effort to touch/communicate in the peak hour of a subway crunch. Amidst the silent CHORUS of strap-hangers, the MAN and WOMAN reveal the plight of their estrangement in a sonorous appeal as intimate as a Marvin Gaye/Tammy Terrel duet. And then there is HOLLY MIMS, the fallen idol *Of Being Hit*. Pushing a broom now, HOLLY engages his partner in a contra-puntal rap/song and dance while exhibiting the internal wounds of his last round of boxing. In *Mars/Monument to the last Black Eunuch*, a BLACK MAN searches for his moment in space to live. His is a performance which owns the massive bravura of a Paul Robeson. He must Orchestrate his scat solo in a call 'n response relationship to a CHORUS which at times speak in the configuration of HORN and BASS rhythms. The improvisational character of this work establishes a compositional mode which is idiomatically a part of black music in form.

Each of these works are forceful excavations of the black urban experience. Their social significance cannot be denied. But more importantly, they reflect the continued development of new forms in the Black Theatre. Goss observes:

> As a black playwright, I try to write, try to project images that are familiar to me. It so happens that I'm also a family man. But there are other families, obviously. And the theatre (building) can and will produce many different types of plays. But the heaviest plays, or productions, will be the ones that will bring black people closer as a basic functioning unit, closer as a family. Closer in their relationships with each other, as well as to each other. The kind of hard work and *sacrifice* it takes to build and sustain a strong family.

Clay Goss is not only one of the more serious and gifted chroniclers of the experience, but also among the most inventive. Perhaps we owe a debt of gratitude to WATSA, a Washington D.C. based theatre group who, under the direction of Rafic Bey and Sati Jamal, first exposed these plays in productions around the country. And certainly we are grateful to Goss for the uncompromising integrity of his memory. His dramaturgy is evidence of one who listens witn an open ear to the elusive rhythms of the distanct drummer, and the signifyin' of a ghetto field holler: the *perfect* unity of *AM*.

History of the Persona Players of St. Louis, Missouri

The purpose of the Persona Players, according to its constitution, is to provide an outlet for diversified talents as well as entertainment for the public through theatrical enterprises, with the hope of adding to the cultural enrichment of the city of St. Louis.

The Page Park YMCA Persona Players are celebrating their 10th anniversary with the presentation of the Broadway musical *Purlie*. The group views this undertaking as a fitting culmination to a productively rewarding decade.*

Original inspiration for the information of the Persona Players came from the Karamu Theatre of Cleveland, Ohio.

The Persona Players was begun initially as an organization to sponsor Black theatre groups' productions on a level previously unknown to patrons of St. Louis theatre. But once established, the Persona Players became imbued with the idea of presenting productions themselves. Although the Persona Players represent a variety of professions and occupations (administrators, teachers, postal employees, nurses, communication arts majors, real estate brokers, etc.), many of the newly-formed group had some amateur involvement with theatre crafts, some as far back as elementary school.

Having conceived the idea of such a theatre group, the next step was the selection of a name. After careful deliberation, the group accepted the name Persona Players. Persona is a Latin word meaning "the voice of the author" or "the author's creation in a literary work."

Since the organization was, from its inception, to be one of a non-profit nature, it was felt that its needs could be best served by affiliating with some community-based organization. An alliance with the Page

*The group has since mounted a production of Leslie Lee's *First Breeze of Summer*.

Park YMCA was offered by the executive director at that time, Mr. Henry Lenior. Through the years this has proven to be a fruitful and gratifying alliance.

The next step was to secure a resident director. This obstacle was overcome by the unanimous selection of Mr. Aaron E. Murphy, perhaps the most noted Black director of quality in the city.

The first production presented by the group was a brief intermission sketch performed at the 1965 Fashion Fair. This skit, written by founding member and first president Sally Forth was entitled *Roof Tops* and was so well received that the group was asked to perform again at the intermission of the 1966 Ebony Fashion Fair.

Once they had gotten their "feet wet," the group was ready to present their conception of drama to the St. Louis public. Consequently, they have presented such plays as *Dilemma* by Joan Brampton, Lillian Hellman's *Little Foxes*, Stephen Vincent Benet's *John Brown's Body*, *Dark of the Moon* by Howard Richardson and William Berney, *My Sweet Charlie* by David Westheimer, *Silver Whistle* by Robert E. McEnroe, an original reading of the play *Trouble, Blues, 'N Trouble* By Sylvester Leaks, and J.E. Franklin's *Black Girl*.

Through continually striving for the kind of professionalism that is so much a part of good theatre anywhere, perhaps their most widely acclaimed productions were two one-act plays by black playwright Douglas Turner Ward, *Happy Ending* and *Day of Absence*, produced both in 1970 and 1972.

Members of the Persona Players have continued to grow on an individual basis with the extension of their talents from writing, acting, and producing to directing whenever the occasion arose.

Remaining true to their original aim of combining the theatre arts with community involvement, the Persona Players have a number of civic accomplishments to their credits. They were one of the early supporters of the presentations of the Negro Ensemble Company brought to the city. They worked diligently to help raise funds for the remodeling of the Carlyn H. Wohl Auditorium on the Page Park Y.M.C.A. campus. Their plays have been produced under the auspices of such organizations as Freedom of Residence, Junior League, Baptist Church of the Holy Communion and Action Against Apathy, St. James A.M.E. Church.

Described basically as a Black theatre group, the Persona Players have not limited their membership by race or creed. Some of their most rewarding experiences have come from working with different organizations and groups. However, their most ambitious endeavor has been the production of *Purlie* by Ossie Davis, with lyrics by Peter Udell and music by Gary Geld. This production marks the first time that the Persona Players have ever extended their talents in alliance with so many civic organizations at one time.

The Persona Players are looking forward to another 10 years of happy involvement with the theatre and the St. Louis community. Perhaps the most viable asset to the talented group is their spirit of camaraderie and their genuine love for the theatre as a means of personal expression and social enrichment.

Black Scenic Artists —An Interview with Edward Burbridge

BY CARL MORRISON (MUNGU KIMYA ABUDU)
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Morrison: How long have you been a scene designer?

Burbridge: About 20 years. I started when I was 14.

M: How did you learn?

B: I started out as a scene painter. I was in California and a scenic artist from New York came out looking for an apprentice to work with him. Someone suggested me and that's the way I started. After that I fell in with a community theater group when I was 14. I was working and helping the set designer when he ran off with somebody in the box office, with all the cash and I had to design the set. So I really fell into it.

M: What shows have you designed during your career?

B: Well, I have done a lot of plays with the Negro Ensemble Company from the first play in the beginning, *The Song of the Lusitanian Bogie,* up to the road company of *River Niger.* I have been working with the New Scenic Repertory Company recently doing *The Visit* directed by Hal Prince and a play called *Holiday* directed by Michael Montel. I designed the American production of *Marat De Sade;* a play called *Jimmy Shine* with Dustin Hoffman; a play called *Does a Tiger Wear a Necktie* with Al Pacino; *Our Town,* a Henry Fonda production; *Big Time Buck White,* off-Broadway with Dick Williams and on-Broadway with Mohammad Ali; plus some films. I did *To Be Young, Gifted, and Black, Book of Numbers* and we are working on *Ceremonies in Dark Old Men* now, for ABC. I have also done some work in South America Theatre.*

M: Have you ever had to hold other jobs while you designed?

B: Not so much recently. I did for years, of course, when I was going to school. Way back when I was about 19, I used to sing gospel with a group called the "Wings Over Jordan" and I used to tour around with them when I wasn't designing. I have had a lot of jobs—janitor, keypunch operator, IBM operator, all those things.

M: Have you had to travel much as a designer?

B: Yes, most of the travel I have done has been because I had a job somewhere. I originally went to South America to design a show there, then Europe. I was at the 1972 Olympics with the Negro Ensemble. We did two plays there.

M: So there is some opportunity for travel?

B: Oh yes, particularly if you study languages. When I had the opportunity to go to Argentina, I started studying Spanish to design this play which was in Spanish. After that I worked for Ballet Folkloric Core and the National Ballet of Chile. Knowing the language really helps. For the '72 Olympics our two sets were built in Germany. I went there to work with a film studio called Bavaria Film where our sets for *Sty of the Blind*

*Mr. Burbridge's more recent work includes art direction for the Kojak television series, and designs for *Absurd Person Singular* and *Absent Friends,* both plays by Alan Ayckbourn.

Pig and a play called *Dream on Monkey Mountain* were built. I also studied at 12 European repertory theatres on a John Hay Whitney foundation grant.

M: Who do you work for most often?

B: I work completely free lance, which means I never know where my next job is coming from. I have done a lot of work for the Negro Ensemble Co., but it's really a matter of certain directors I have worked for over the years. It's generally through directors that you get jobs. A director you have worked with will ask for you and generally a producer will give a director the designer he wants.

M: Can a black person earn a living as a set designer?

B: I think that if anyone can, he or she can. Well, particularly now with all the black theatre, we certainly need more black scene designers.

M: Is there a tendency for the contemporary black playwright or director to allow the designer a freer hand in designing a set?

B: Well, it depends on what kind of play you are dealing with. I think it's been my experience that black writers are receptive to all kinds of abstraction. I think the black audience has a kind of sophistication; for instance, in the way certain kinds of musical forms are really appreciated and produced by black people. I don't think a black audience is that tied to naturalism or realism. I mean they can look at something and say, "That's hip" without immediately questioning the form. We don't really have a structured theatre-going history. We are building a black audience now, so we are not really tied to any forms that they have been seeing for years. So many of the black plays move from naturalism to fantasy, and then there are musical passages in the middle. We have, of course, straight up, structured naturalistic plays, which take place in the livingroom-kitchen combination, but I think that black plays are moving toward another kind of expression and many of those plays have yet to be heard. We have plays like the *River Niger* which are more realistic or naturalistic, but on the other hand, we have the more ritualistic plays and plays that move back and forth between ritualistic and naturalistic styles.

M: And these plays offer the designer a freer hand?

B: Yes. We don't have many drawing room comedies. We're not in drawing rooms.

M: Which design that you've done do you like the most and why do you like that one?

B: I really cannot answer that. I don't find any design that I've done absolutely satisfying. I like pieces of designs that I have done. I am always working on certain ideas, thoughts or philosophies, of what I think a design should be. To the extent that the play allows it, I try to express these ideas.

M: So you have never been totally satisfied?

B: I like the design of a play I did recently on Broadway. It didn't last very long. It was called *Status Quo Vadis*. But, that design was the result of thoughts that I have had over the years about things that I would like to see on the stage. This particular play gave me the opportunity to use some of those ideas because they were right for that play. Really, it's a matter of connecting with the right material. If you have ideas you would

like to express, it's a matter of connecting with a play that allows you to express those ideas.

M: Could you describe what the set was about?

B: I think that particular set was closer to architecture. It could be said to be an architectonic, non-specific structure. Those are just words. You would have to see it. It was a three-dimensional, supergraphic idea, all in white pine. Another design of mine that I like very much is the design for *Dream on Monkey Mountain*, a beautiful play by Derrick Wolcott. It's a good play for a black designer, because it examines and dramatizes the conflicts of identity in a highly theatrical and moving way. It gives the designer a lot of range.

M: What trends do you see developing in the set design?

B: Designers are being influenced by Josef Svaboda who is being seen for the first time in this country and whose work has only been seen in books in the past. It's pretty much an eclectic thing. I don't see any strong trend in any particular direction. As far as Broadway theatre is concerned, with the opening of *Candide*, the environmental theatre has come to Broadway. This is something which has existed off-Broadway for a long time. I cannot say that I know that much about what's happening in the university theaters. I generally work in New York, so there's a whole area of theatre that I cannot say I really know about. Perhaps there are some very exciting things happening.

M: Who is the earliest black set designer you know?

P: Perry Watkins was the first black set designer in the Union: I was probably the second. Perry worked originally with the Federal Theatre Project years ago and he is still active.* He does a lot of films. The last one he did was *Across a Hundred and Tenth Street*. When I was in California, before I even came to New York, I knew about Perry Watkins.

M: Do you know any other shows that he has designed?

P: Most of his recent work has been in films. I know he has done some musicals. He did Duke Ellington's *My People*. His work goes way back. I have had long discussions with him about the way it was and the way it is now.

M: To your knowledge, is there such a thing as a black aesthetic in scenic art?

B: I don't know that there is yet. I think there could be. I had a whole discussion about this at a national theatre convention. the topic was precisely that. I believe that there could be and it would be a very positive sort of thing.

M: Could you describe what it might entail, or what its history might be?

B: In the area of scenic design, we have several influences. We have a French influence, British influence, German influence, to name a few. The only kind of influence we don't have in a pure state would be African; excepting possibly that design being done in Africa. I don't know what form it would take or what it would look like. At one point, around the turn of the century, many of the designers were painters. Their style became evident in scene design. Picasso was designing scenery, and some of

*Mr. Watkins is now deceased.

Picasso's work is African oriented. Certainly there is an African influence in his work, but I think it could be visibly more apparent.

M: Are you saying it would probably come about via the painters?

B: Yes, I would think the work of contemporary black painters such as Benny Andrews or Romare Beardon, could be of some influence particularly in the area of dance, the work can be more painterly. If you think about something African in form, it almost means a non-proscenium kind of theatre. If you think of African dance and African ritual, it's all performed in a cirular manner with the spectators all surrounding and watching the event which takes place in the center. Also, the spectators themselves may join in. It's really not about sitting down somewhere and watching something through a proscenium.

M: It would be more of a theatre in the round?

B: Yes, I would think so. But further, if one had to design an environment for Aretha Franklin to appear in, how would one express her and what she does? That would be the design problem. There must be a form which could reflect what Aretha Franklin projects. I think that could be a black aesthetic. If I seem vague about this, it's because I have not seen it myself, but I do believe it's possible. I have tried to do it a bit, but I don't think I have particularly succeeded in it yet.

M: Yes, several designers that I've spoken to have considered the idea in their works.

B: I have not seen it to any great extent. Groups like Barbara Ann Tear's (National Black Theatre) are working in that area. To whatever extent she succeeds in creating the particular environment for the type of work she does, that design has found its way toward being an expression of a black aesthetic.

M: How would you finish the incomplete sentence, "What the black scene designer needs is. . .?"

B: The same thing any set designer needs.

M: What's that?

B: As far as preparation goes, I think a black scene designer needs the same training any set designer needs. There is no such thing as black drafting. The next thing would be opportunities to design or a place to design. Also, information is needed. Some black set designers have fallen into designing the way that I have. I don't think that there has been enough information about set design among younger black people so that they know that it exists as an area of work. This is particularly explained by the fact that we haven't had the theater-going tradition that other races have. Even though that is rapidly changing, theatre has always been an area for the leisure classes. Black people have really been dealing with how to get a job to live as opposed to how to get a job in an area like the theatre; other than as actors or performers. I've just found from my own experience that when people come into the training group at NEC, they have not had the chance to know that there really is an area for scenic lighting and costume. I think that it's a matter of getting more information earlier to black artists and younger people who have talent that could be expressed in this way or could be turned toward the theatre. That's the only way I can explain the fact that there are not more black

set designers. We obviously have to have people who are talented, who have natural drawing ability that could be developed and used in the theatre. Numerically there really should be more black set designers. I think that it's starting to happen now.

M: Is there a value in a college education for a set designer?

B: I can only relate it to my own experience. I went to an art school. I went to Pratt Institute. So I got a particular kind of background and I was heavy into art courses. Structural courses and design courses. That was fine. Though I had taken the required liberal arts courses, they did not give me enough in-depth study in the literature of the theatre. I had to get some things in other places. I think every step of the way, you try to fill in what you don't know and determine where the best place is to find that out. I think people should stay in school. I still go to school.

M: What can the United Scenec Artists (USA) do specifically for the black man?

B: First of all, USA is structured in a way that requires that you take an exam. Anyone who takes the examination and passes it gets in. Once in, USA does not do anything more for the black scenic artist than for any other scenic artist. It is not really a job-getting organization. It offers you certain protections and sets standards. There's a list, and if you are out of work you call up and get on the list. People who need scenic artists can call the union and see who is available. I was offered a job in El Salvador as a consultant for a television station for three months which was something that came through the union. They wanted someone who could speak Spanish. The Union does not at this point have a training program or an apprentice program as they have had at times in the past.

M: Would you say that training programs could be helpful in getting black folks into the design area?

B: I think it would be valuable. Various people in the Union have suggested this, not just in terms of the black designer, but also in general for the sake of training artists to carry on in various design areas.

M: Does the union have a tendency to be a closed shop? Unions have had the reputation for bringing their own along. Does USA have this tendency? For instance, are there any stipulations or processes that could block a candidate from being accepted after having passed the exam?

B: That has not been my experience and I have not found that. I took the examination in 1956. That's a long time ago. I passed the exam and was admitted to the Union. As a member of the union I have not come across any stipulations which would be prohibitive. I certainly have not encountered anything which is against admitting black people to the union or anything of that nature. The way it is structured, everyone is given a number when they take the examination and there are several sections of the examination which are judged by different people.

M: Has there ever been any attempt to organize black people in the scenic arts area?

B: We have talked about forming some sort of group, mostly for the purpose of information and discussion among ourselves, so that we know each other and black theatre groups know who is available to them. I don't see much value of an organization like that within the union.

M: You mean like a caucus?

B: Right.

M: Something outside the Union has been spoken about?

B: Among the black designers who know each other in New York. I don't know many black designers outside of New York. I think the idea has some value if it's productive. It would be valuable if the people in the organization could grow and learn things from the association or if something were being done in the area of black theatre.

M: Do you mean if it were more educational or instructional?

B: Yes. It would be good if it were some sort of forum where people could learn something from each other or from people outside of the group. If it is no more than just a club, one could compile a list of who's who and it could end there. I think there are things to be done in black theatre that are not being done. In terms of its history, I think a lot that is happening is not being recorded. Photographs of productions are not being collected. I don't think any archives are being maintained in any formal way. At least, I don't know of any. I hope I'm mistaken.

M: Would that be something that the Black Theatre Alliance in New York could move toward?

B: To my knowledge at this time, they are not. It requires money. It almost has to be a project by itself.

M: Thank you, Mr. Burbridge, for your time.

B: Not at all.